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Vampires as a Tool to Destabilize Contemporary Notions of Gender and Sexuality

Renée Vincent

The Quarante Club Prize

Conventional wisdom states that as bloodthirsty killers vampires must exist outside of civilized society. However, in reality, they have been welcomed into the hearts and homes of the population at large. Readers and audiences of this genre have glorified the predators' timeless beauty and romanticized their carnal power. Vampire stories are best sellers, many with loyal fan bases and cult followings. While these creatures can be humanly classified as sociopathic murderers, their suggestive nature is hard to deny; vampires and sex are inseparable. This is reflective of the ubiquitous role that sex plays in mainstream culture. Nina Auerbach establishes that vampires are a reflection of the social and political times that create them in her book, *Our Vampires, Ourselves*. Alternately, vampires may actually influence society and the culture that creates them by embracing marginalized ideals. The very fiber of the vampire's otherness has the ability to embody subverted cultural norms, radiating luminosity capable of penetrating the closet door of repressed sexuality, the social hetero-normative, and the gender binary that arbitrarily dictates traditional male and female roles. An analysis of Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* combined with Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls* will be juxtaposed with research and philosophies from leaders in the fields of sexual theory and queer theory to prove that vampires are used as tools to destabilize contemporary notions of gender and sexuality in modern society.

Michel Foucault is a French philosopher who wrote volumes containing his theories on power, crime, illness, modern sexual history, and society. In Volume One of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault explains sexuality in the seventeenth century as a time that "sexual practices had little need of secrecy" (3). In the following decades, sexual freedom was swiftly stifled and carefully confined with the coming of the eighteenth and nineteenth century and, pointedly, the Victorian Era. Foucault continues his explanation on how "the conjugal family took custody of [sexual freedom] and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction" (4). Although he attests that "silence became the rule" when publically addressing sex, Foucault is actually arguing that the discourse of sex was never lost in society, but rather the way it was being talked about changed. "One had to speak of it as a thing to not be simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum" (Foucault 24). This atmosphere not only imposed specific ideals attributing to the growth of the population but also "the manner in which each individual made use of his sex" (Foucault 26). Moreover, he believed that people were constantly confessing

their sexual exploits in church confessionals, to psychiatrists, and otherwise (Foucault 24).

Regardless of any atonements made for their “sexual sins,” those not abiding the norm could be found in the brothel or mental hospital, as these were “places of tolerance [for illegitimate sexualities]” (Foucault 4). Additionally, there was prison, which is where Oscar Wilde was sent in 1895; he was convicted of “gross indecency” for questionable homoerotic relations with young men—specifically one whose father brought the charges against Wilde. Late nineteenth century American treatment of sex was proved comparatively bleak and strictly advocated “sex within the context of marriage, and celibacy outside of marriage,” while viewing “masturbation as unhealthy” (Melody 235). The Comstock Laws of 1873 made it a crime to distribute anything that could be perceived as contraception, morally corrupt, or obscene; the only acceptable sex was hetero sex within a marriage for the explicit purpose of procreation. Collectively, these reasons explain the need for necessary creative measures when speaking about non-normative sexuality, as it was socially, culturally, and legally unacceptable to openly do so throughout the nineteenth century and for over half of the twentieth. Following the repressive ideals witnessed in America during the 1950s, the subsequent decades that followed proved that the time for change had come.

Following the socially and politically charged 1960s, transformations in societal constructs were beginning to take shape in the 1970s. The Gay Rights Movement became more organized, especially after the Stonewall Riots, and focused on “reformative politics, instigating activism from liberation, and encouraging gay pride and self-affirmation” (D’Emelio). In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association eliminated homosexuality from its lists of mental disorders. The mentality of the mainstream population may have been slow to change, but progress was a reality. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 opened the door for the Equal Rights Amendment of 1972, both of which were instrumental to social change. Additionally, the birth control pill was FDA approved in 1960, with 6.5 million American women using it as contraceptive by the year 1965 (PBS.org). Moreover, the academic pursuit of feminist and gender studies was gaining momentum; there was earnest and intelligent dialogue concerning sexuality, gender and equality. It is in this political and social climate that Anne Rice published *Interview with the Vampire*, featuring her non-conformist characters, Louis and Lestat.

Vampires Louis and Lestat have a relationship that is suggestive from its very beginnings. When Lestat comes back to Louis after draining his blood, Louis admits: “The moment I saw him, saw his extraordinary aura and knew him to be no creature I had ever known, I was reduced to nothing...I completely forgot myself...and in the same instant knew totally the meaning of possibility” (Rice 13). Shortly after this, the reader is aware of the physicality between the two men when Louis recounts Lestat’s demeanor just prior to his changing Louis into a vampire: “He lay down beside me now on the steps, his movement so graceful ...it made me think of a lover... he pressed so hard...held my entire prone body in check...and sank his teeth into my neck” (Rice 18). The images that Rice creates are not only sexual, but sensual and intimate; Louis goes into detail about his feelings. When the act of actually sucking Lestat’s blood happens, Louis “drank, sucking the blood out of the holes...experiencing the special pleasure of sucking nourishment,” while simultaneously becoming aware of their hearts beating

together (Rice 18). This reads much like a romantic experience, or as Lestat taking Louis' virginity/innocence. Louis is confused at first, and has a hard time accepting his altered reality. "I begged Lestat to let me stay in the closet [instead of his coffin], but he laughed, astonished. "Don't you know what you are?" (Rice 23). When Louis realizes what he is exactly, he has "no real fear" of closed places any longer (Rice 23). Even though Louis' transformation shares similarities with the act of coming out as a homosexual, it is important to note that Louis' sexuality is not the sole focus.

Gothic studies professor William Hughes addresses the vampire Louis by stating, "For all his talk of closets and coffins, for all his physical intimacies with Lestat and Armand, [Louis] is a vampire in his complexity... homosexuality is an implication or an indwelling reflection, not its true singular focus" (142). The aptitude that Rice exhibits in assembling these connections without an overt declaration concerning her characters' sexuality operates as a culturally strategic exchange. She avoids censorship without compromising her vision. Actually, this is a practice that has been utilized in Gothic fiction from its onset: the language establishes a specific atmosphere, while leaving sexual innuendo up for interpretation.

The benefits of using word associations and "code" when addressing issues that are under societal scrutiny specifically allow the reader freedom for selective recognition, "allowing him or her to remain officially and safely ignorant" (Hughes 40). English literature professor and scholar of Gothic fiction, Mair Rigby, explains the appeal of coded text in Gothic fiction is "precisely because its deployment of coded language allows its readers to experience the thrills of sexual connotation without having to admit the possible meaning in the text" (Hughes 40). Rigby goes on further to clarify that the use of specific terms and themes such as "forbidden knowledge, recognition, paranoia, the unspeakable, etc....[Gothic texts] can be read as mobilizing conventions which have come to double as both Gothic tropes *and* tropes within the language of sexual deviance" (Hughes 38). This practice is something that Foucault addresses specifically, contending that while sexuality was never absent from social discourse, its treatment changed and "it may indeed be true that a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor was codified" due to "new rules of propriety" (17). Even if American mainstream society wasn't ready to widely accept reformative gay policies, *Interview with the Vampire* was coded well enough to be embraced by the culture—in all its queerness.

In the sense of 'queer' meaning different, Louis is most definitely queer—although not necessarily gay. Shortly after becoming a vampire, Louis is taken with a woman living on a nearby plantation named Babette Freniere. Regardless of his status as a plantation owner himself, she sees him as a "ghostlike creature" and condemns him as unholy with her declaration: "Get thee behind me, Satan" (Rice 66). Louis' identity is vampire first and foremost. Additionally, the vampire's status as a societal other can represent various subverted human norms. For the vampires Louis and Lestat, their vital need for a life-force present within both men and women is crucial to their identity, making it difficult to classify their sexuality. "Sex of object choice may be irrelevant to an individual's identity formation: racial, ethnic, and class differences may be more important" (Valocchi). Queer theory goes even further to explain that "the practices, expressions, and interests emergent from this intersection of differences [regarding an individual's identity formation] cannot be captured by the dominant categories of

homosexual or heterosexual or any other single identity category” (Valocchi). Rice’s vampires are their own unique race, in which there are different ethnicities that operate outside of human class affiliations. They are able to utilize a fluid sexuality that isn’t bound by procreative necessity and doesn’t neatly fit into cultural constructions such as the male/female, and heterosexual/homosexual binaries.

Louis and Lestat’s fluid forms of sexuality could be read as commentary on how rigidly defined categories inadequately represent the full spectrum of human gender and sexuality. Though Lestat remains distant throughout the novel, Louis’ interview is nothing short of a full confessional. The reader understands his thoughts and feelings on a humanistic level. It’s doubtful mass readership would identify with Louis’ needs as a vampire. It is plausible, however, that his incomplete submission to exclusive femininity or masculinity, heterosexuality or homosexuality, and even his conflicted feelings on the very ‘nature’ of his being could be significant to a faction of readers who challenge the limitations of existing on a single side of the binary identity. Rice also introduces the family dynamic with her inclusion of the child-vampire, Claudia.

Of all of Anne Rice’s characters, Claudia could be the one hardest to streamline. When Louis finds her just prior to biting her, he describes her as “five at most” (Rice 74). It is understood that vampires’ aging process is suspended from the point they change from mortal to vampire. It is difficult to fathom how Claudia was able to mentally progress into a cunning personality when the cognitive thinking skills of children have much to do with their underdeveloped brain. Logically, she should have been suspended in the mind of a very young child. Yet Claudia is plotting murder and is verbose regarding the dissatisfaction she feels in her dependence on Louis. Nonetheless, Rice does present an alternative family—one with two fathers and a daughter, and again places her characters well outside of the dominant social norms for the time.

In contrast, Poppy Z. Brite’s, *Lost Souls* (1992) could be taken as a social statement that coding text to include non-normative sexual relationships was no longer necessary. Brite’s characters are honest and unforgiving in their actions and desires. Just as Anne Rice rewrote the myth in *Interview with the Vampire*, Brite’s creation is original to the genre. Unlike Rice, who kept with tradition that blood was the site of transmission, the vampires in *Lost Souls* procreate by having heterosexual intercourse. These vampires are born; “they are not undead. They have never died. Some of them never do, or not for hundreds upon hundreds of years” (Brite, *Lost Souls* 275). Removing the ‘bad blood’ metaphor eliminates connections with infection and disease. William Hughes comments on the changes that Brite incorporates into the vampire myth, specifically that their “distinctions are scripted as matters of biology rather than theology: vampires are a parallel to, rather than a deviation from, the known human paradigm” (Hughes 145). Furthermore, the birthing process always results in the death of the mother. As stated in the novel, “our babies are born without teeth...but even so they manage to chew their way out. Perhaps they have a set of womb teeth. Perhaps they claw their way out with their tiny fingers; but they kill, always they kill. Just as I ripped my mother apart” (Brite, *Lost Souls* 277). Because female vampires know the dangers of reproducing, they are understandably reluctant to allow it. This has made human women the more likely candidates while also compromising the vampire genealogy. It is the humans who are infecting the vampire bloodline, bringing about genetic changes such as the ability to eat

food, drink alcohol, and harmlessly enjoy the sunlight. These aren't negative qualities, however; they are human qualities, nonetheless. And even though Brite has given these vampires the ability to fit into human society, they don't have any interest in doing so.

Brite's young vampires, Zillah, Twig, and Molochai, are depicted as unencumbered travelers with a visual appearance of gutter punks and an insatiable appetite for drugs, alcohol, junk food, and sex. They drive around the country picking up hitchhikers and misfits to satisfy their desire for blood, while turning to each other for companionship and intimacy. Although technically unrelated, the trio is explained in the novel as being "as much as a family as anyone could be, anywhere, ever" (Brite, *Lost Souls* 83). Their tastes will offend some readers' sensibilities, but the vampires exemplify and honor their familial bond, contrasting the dysfunctional human families in the novel. The strong dynamic of the vampire family isn't defined by its procreative or administrative ability, but rather the erotic and recreational interaction of its members, who are "without exception, bisexual, and the only extended relationships they maintain...are with their own kind" (Hughes 147). Their kinship reveals a unity that is deficient within the human heterosexual familial groupings in the novel and, therefore, contests the societal discourse that "favors a familial unit strictly based on its compliance to the societal norm" (Lehr 5). Their non-compliance with the societal norm expands to other social mores as well.

Just as Louis had to adjust his moral compass when he realized he must kill other living beings to survive, so does *Lost Souls* character, Nothing. Although Nothing has been a vampire from birth, he doesn't understand his true identity until he runs away from his human foster parent's home to find where he truly belongs. In a twisted version of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Nothing becomes sexually involved with Zillah, his biological father. Upon the speculation of this knowledge, Nothing is momentarily struck with the human taboo of his actions as he thinks, "[he has] swallowed stuff that could have been [his] brothers and sisters," but recovers immediately as "he could not disgust himself...[or] make himself ashamed" (Brite, *Lost Souls* 228). The things that the "rational daylight world would expect him to feel" had no significance to him any longer. "In a world of night, in a world of blood, what did such pallid rules matter?" (Brite, *Lost Souls* 228). Instead of spending the duration of the novel speculating on his capacity for good and evil, Nothing quickly readjusts his thinking by understanding how arbitrary human societal rules were to him now. The restrictions and taboos that structure human society "have no real function in a world in which spontaneous practice rather than legalistic lineage qualifies one for membership" (Hughes 149). Brite questions the guidelines that human society embraces by deconstructing the premise that shapes societal taboo. She is able to use her alternative vampire society as a mode of exploration into the concepts that control and determine the norm, while embracing queer theory concepts.

Queer theory emerged in the early 1990s, parallel with the release of *Lost Souls*. Interestingly, Poppy Z. Brite's personal life could have influenced the specific depiction of sexuality and gender in *Lost Souls*, as the author openly discusses personal experience with gender dysphoria. Poppy Z. Brite was born as Melissa Ann Brite in 1967, but identifies as a gay trans-man named Billy Martin. All of his work includes openly bisexual and gay characters who find companionship and intimacy through commonality,

downplaying sexuality as a defining personal trait. His most prominent literary couple, named Ricky and Gary, grew up together in the New Orleans lower ninth ward and had “always been vaguely aware of each other, as the few white kids in public schools were” (Brite, *Liquor* 5). As the two of them forge a friendship, it is their common neighborhood, socio-economic status, interests, and loyalty that bond them together. Their sexual involvement with each other is written as a natural development in their relationship, focusing on their shared affinity and less on their identifying gender and/or sexuality. This characterization is also present within Brite’s vampire family. The vampires in *Lost Souls* demonstrate sexual and gender identities that are even more fluid than Louis and Lestat. Brite formulates the identities of her characters in a collective (rather than definitive) manner, much like how queer theory “attends to the ways various categories inflect and transform each other” (Routledge XVI).

Vampires are created as a reflection of cultural and societal conditions. They are capable of instigating introspection into the human condition through contrast and comparison. Vampires’ sexual connotation has evolved through time, just as the understanding of sexuality and gender has advanced, especially since the civil movements of the 1960s. If the role of the vampire is synonymous with the cultural other, the application of subverted social structure invents a parallel to human society. It, therefore, becomes apparent that the vampire can aid in challenging social constructs, acting as a tool to destabilize contemporary notions specific to gender and sexuality.

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